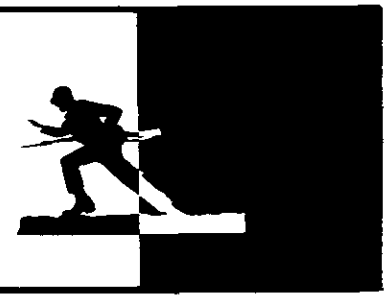
PROFESSIONAL FORUM



Low Intensity Conflict
And the Changing Nature of Warfare

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General of the Army Douglas MacArthur, in May 1962, delivered a speech at the United States Military Academy at West Point in which he spoke of the courage, chivalry, and self-sacrifice of soldiers, dictated by adherence to the cardinal principles of Duty, Honor, Country. This speech was the story of the American man-at-arms during this century — a century of two major world wars — and by extension, the story of the American soldier throughout the nation's history.

After almost 30 years, the eloquence of that address in word and thought is still an inspiration to all who have worn the uniforms of the U.S. military services, and it still has the power to stir patriotic emotion.

But what about the nature of warfare itself? Is it still governed by the same great moral code — the code of conduct and chivalry — about which General MacArthur spoke? And are we prepared to fight and win today's and tomorrow's battles?

Now that some of the dust from DESERT STORM has settled, you may cite our recent experience in Southwest Asia and answer those questions in the affirmative. Although the high technology weapons were certainly more advanced than any that we had ever before deployed in battle, Operation DESERT STORM took the form of the modern conventional warfare that is well known to the U.S. military establishment. And we succeeded.

But it is important to recognize that four decades have passed since U.S. forces fought similar conventional battles on the Korean peninsula once the 38th parallel was breached — four decades since MacArthur's brilliant amphibious assault at Inchon harbor. What have the U.S. military services been doing in the intervening years, a period that President Dwight D. Eisenhower called "years neither of total war nor of total peace"?

In part, we were fighting the Cold War. Our principal focus, in both military strategy and defense resources, was on deterring a Soviet attack in Europe — or, if deterrence should fail, on being prepared to fight the Soviets in a global war. Here, too, we succeeded. The Warsaw Pact has been officially dissolved. Germany has been united, and Soviet troops are withdrawing from eastern Europe on a grand scale. A credible nuclear deterrent, a substantial conventional presence, and a strong commitment to our Allies served to prevent the realization of the warfighting scenario for which we had planned.

While all eyes were fixed on the inter-German border, though, our actual warfighting was being done in a completely different environment — one that we term "low intensity conflict," or LIC. Enemy soldiers did not cross the Fulda Gap, but revolutions, insurgencies, hijackings, and narco-terrorism cratered the politico-military landscape.

In the period since World War II, the United States' military forces have been involved — directly and indirectly — in 48 major low intensity conflicts around the world, primarily in the Third World. And despite our overwhelming military superiority, we have not been able to deter or to effectively fight low intensity conflicts.

Lest some be misled as to where my argument and line of reasoning are going, let me put low intensity conflict into perspective.

First, I acknowledge that nuclear and conventional missions will continue to

dominate the activities of the Department of Defense, and rightly so. These capabilities ensure the survival of the nation and can deter, suppress, and even defeat the most dangerous and direct threats to U.S. interests.

By comparison, low intensity conflict might seem to be "small potatoes." Nevertheless, it merits priority attention for two fundamental reasons: First, even with a reduced Soviet threat, low intensity conflict *can* threaten vital U.S. interests. And second, LIC will increasingly be the form of warfare we will have to fight.

Our historical commitment to checking Soviet aggression in Europe was mirrored by our efforts to counter Soviet expansion in the Third World, and this commitment lay at the foundation of our involvement in many of those 48 low intensity conflicts. As a result, many believe that the new era of unprecedented cooperation between the superpowers and the reduced Soviet threat will lead to a parallel reduction in Third World crises requiring U.S. intervention. After all, the Sandinistas have been voted out of power in a democratic election in Nicaragua; a peace treaty has finally been signed in Angola after years of bloody civil war; and the newly democratic Warsaw Pact states have closed down the training camps that were once home to some of the most ruthless international terrorists.

UNCERTAINTY

But a reduced Soviet threat does not necessarily mean that fewer conflicts will affect U.S. interests. Peace is not breaking out all over. When President George Bush was asked, in the wake of the collapse of the Berlin Wall and all that it symbolized, "Where is the threat now?" he replied, "The enemy is instability, the enemy is uncertainty." And that is exactly what low intensity conflict is all about.

Numerous phenomena bring about instability around the world, including rising nationalism; the collapse of authoritarianism; burgeoning international arms bazaars; increasing ethnic tensions; religious fundamentalism; environmental degradation and disease; economic stagnation; and overpopulation. Terrorists, drug traffickers, anti-American insurgents, and other aggressors will seek to capitalize on this instability.

Although it is true that low intensity conflicts do not threaten the very survival of our nation, they can adversely affect vital U.S. interests — at home and abroad. On the home front, drug trafficking has created social and economic dislocations in our cities, our towns, and our schools; and years of civil war in Central and South America have led to huge refugee problems. Internationally, terrorists have targeted U.S. citizens and businesses overseas; revolutionary forces have overthrown friendly governments and reduced U.S. influence, access to foreign markets, and transit rights; and major LIC events have undermined the will of the U.S public to stay engaged abroad. In summary, LIC is important because it threatens U.S. interests — usually slowly and indirectly, but with cumulative consequences that can be quite serious.

Furthermore, a succession of unaddressed LIC challenges can suggest U.S. impotence, embolden adversaries, and destabilize the international order that is essential for our security and prosperity. In this regard, it is useful to ponder the question: When did Saddam Hussein's miscalculation concerning his invasion of Kuwait begin? Did it begin with weak U.S. support for the Shah of Iran during the 1979 revolution, with the seizure of the U.S. Embassy in Teheran, with the failure at DESERT ONE, with the bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut, or with the United States' failure to gain the release of Americans held hostage in Lebanon?

Low intensity conflict also merits our attention because it is the form of conflict in which U.S. forces are most likely to be engaged in the future. In fact, I believe the trend toward low intensity conflict will accelerate in the aftermath of our Persian Gulf campaign. Conventional deterrence has been significantly enhanced as a result of the military superiority, determination, and will that the United States demonstrated in Operation DESERT STORM. It is therefore unlikely that our vital and important interests will be challenged directly, at least in the near term.

INDIRECT THREAT

Rather, those who wish to challenge our resolve, and those who are determined to pursue interests that are counter to ours, will do so indirectly — by threatening American lives and property and undermining institutions and values that promote democracy and civil liberties. They now clearly understand that the only means available to them will be various forms of indirect aggression such as terrorism, insurgency, subversion, sabotage, proxy warfare, and drug trafficking. Adding fuel to the fire is the fact that these activities can also provide them with a low-cost, low-risk, and high-visibility geostrategic payoff.

You might reply, "Okay, I accept your argument that indirect aggression is the most likely threat to U.S. interests. But if we can defeat Saddam Hussein and the fourth largest Army in the world in 100 hours of ground combat, then we can certainly defeat the Sendero Luminoso in Peru, Pablo Escobar in Colombia, and the Hizballah in Lebanon."

But that just isn't the case. To make my point, I would like to return to the discussion of the changing nature of warfare and the resulting limitations on conventional military power.

Within this context, one of the most important features of low intensity conflict is the nature of the enemy — an enemy that does not adhere to the established rules of warfare of the past 300 years. In that regard, he does not observe the distinction between combatants and non-combatants. He targets both. Witness the loss of hundreds of innocent lives as Pan Am Flight 103 exploded in the skies over Scotland, the peasants brutally slaughtered by guerrillas in the countryside of Mozambique,

and the politicians and journalists murdered gang-land style by the Colombian drug cartels. These have all been the victims of low intensity conflict.

Not only does the enemy not distinguish between combatants and noncombatants as he wages war, but he himself is difficult to distinguish from the population at large. Terrorists, revolutionaries, and drug traffickers do not wear uniforms. Try to locate the deadly terrorist in a crowded airport lounge or the narcotics trafficker on the streets of Medellin. It is difficult to fight a war when you can't discriminate between the enemy and the rest of the population.

In addition, since the enemy is most often not a state, there is no government and official property that can be targeted. For these reasons, the traditional concept of deterrence — which is based upon the threat of responding with overwhelming military force — has extremely limited utility in a low intensity environment.

Furthermore, the enemy defies the rules of war most blatantly through his tactics. He employs terror and intimidation and engages in what, under the established rules of war, we would consider criminal activities. In sum, the enemy is not easy to identify; he doesn't play by our rules; and he cannot be targeted by our military strength.

Beyond the nature of the enemy, the LIC warfare environment is different from mid and high intensity conflict in several other respects. Most fundamental is the fact that low intensity conflict is a protracted struggle for political legitimacy. Traditional military objectives such as the capture of terrain are secondary, because political objectives — particularly gaining legitimacy by building popular support — dominate even at the operational and tactical levels. While the military services have the lead role in other levels of conflict, they have only a supporting role in low intensity conflict. In fact, conventional military operations can often be counterproductive in a low intensity warfare environment. To counter LIC threats, political, economic, and informational instruments of power must all be brought to bear. The main point is that low intensity conflict is not just a lesser degree of conventional conflict.

President John F. Kennedy, in 1962, described the low intensity conflict challenge and what was required to confront that challenge. He said:

This is another type of war, new in its intensity, ancient in its origin — war by guerrillas, subversives, insurgents, assassins; war by ambush instead of by combat; by infiltration instead of aggression, seeking victory by eroding and exhausting the enemy instead of engaging him ... It requires in those situations where we must counter it, and these are the kinds of challenges that will be before us in the next decade if freedom is to be saved, a whole new

kind of strategy, a wholly different kind of force, and therefore a new and wholly different kind of military training.

Have we heeded that insightful message? Are we prepared for the challenges of low intensity conflict? Have we given enough attention to LIC doctrine, requirements, technology and equipment, and training?

My answer to these questions is a resounding "No." We are not comfortable fighting these conflicts; they don't fit into our military tradition. The Army-Air Force Joint LIC Project Final Report, issued in 1986, acknowledged our deficiency this way: "As a nation, we do not understand low intensity conflict; we respond without unity of effort; we execute our activities poorly; and we lack the ability to sustain operations."

The U.S. military establishment has a number of important military missions, and low intensity conflict must be added to that list. The successes we have enjoyed elsewhere along the spectrum of conflict have given our adversaries tremendous incentive to avoid direct confrontation with us. Addressing the challenges posed by low intensity conflict, however, requires more than conventional approaches, conventional thinking, and conventional forces. The multi-dimensional nature of these threats requires an equally multi-dimensional, and usually unconventional, approach.

Having a policy for addressing low intensity conflict does not mean that U.S. forces will become engaged in every insurrection, terrorist act, or ethnic struggle around the world. The U.S. is not "the world's policeman." Nevertheless, the Department of Defense does have a key role to play in the area of low intensity conflict, in part because of the sheer vastness of its resources, and in part because it has assets that are particularly well suited for commitment in a low intensity conflict environment.

The nature of war has indeed changed. Nuclear and conventional war challenges will continue. But warfare for the vast majority of nations will be low intensity conflict. If U.S. interests are to be protected in this new warfare environment, U.S. military forces must be prepared for these unconventional threats.

Terrorism, civil wars, and remote insurgencies may not threaten U.S. interests with the same immediacy and clarity as the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, but we will fail in our mission if we do not dedicate ourselves to meeting the challenges of low intensity conflict.

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